



CABINET REPORT: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG)

Cabinet information report prepared on behalf of the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee

Cabinet meeting date	20 September 2023
Presenting Officer	Cllr Lisa Spivey (Chair of the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee)
Report Status	Information and scrutiny
Purpose of Report	<p>At the Gloucestershire County Council meeting on 9 November 2022, members considered Motion 908 - Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).</p> <p>To view the outcomes of the discussion at full Council, please refer to the agenda and minutes published on the Gloucestershire County Council website at the link here.</p> <p>The motion included a request that the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee investigate and produce a report for Cabinet on the steps the County Council could be taking to address VAWG in the county.</p> <p>Following in-depth briefings and discussions at Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee meetings on 7 March, 16 May and 18 July 2023, the committee has agreed the following report for presentation to Cabinet at its meeting on 20 September 2023.</p> <p>To view the discussions at the committee meetings, please refer to the agenda and minutes published on the Gloucestershire County Council at the link here.</p>
Actions sought	<p>Cabinet to consider the report prepared by the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee in response to concerns raised as Motion 908 (Violence Against Women and Girls) at the full council meeting on 9 November 2022. Please refer to the summary of recommendations at Annex A to the report for details of the committee's proposals</p>

Background Documents	Adult Social and Communities Scrutiny Committee Meeting - 7 March 2023 item 5 (page 37) (Public Pack) Agenda Document for Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee, 07/03/2023 10:00 (gloucestershire.gov.uk)
Annex	Annex A – Summary of Recommendations
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Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

Report for Cabinet prepared on behalf of the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee

1. Context

1.1 In November 2022, full Council passed Motion 908 condemning all violence against women and girls (VAWG) and committing the Council to taking a series of actions to help prevent VAWG in Gloucestershire.

1.2 The motion included a request that the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee investigate and produce a report for Cabinet on the steps the County Council could be taking to end VAWG in the county; and how it can engage with relevant local agencies in relation to training and support for victims and survivors of violence and abuse.

1.3 The Scrutiny Committee received a joint paper and presentation on this topic at its March meeting from County Council officers and representatives from the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner. This paper prepared on behalf of the committee reports back to Cabinet on the findings of the committee's investigation and makes recommendations on next steps. It also takes into account the presentation at the Police Crime Panel meeting on 7 July 2023 regarding work to increase trust and confidence in the police, and address sexism and misogyny in the force which forms parts of Gloucestershire constabulary's work programme on VAWG.

2. What is VAWG and what is the scale of the issue in Gloucestershire?

2.1 The Government published the national 'Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Strategy' in 2021. The strategy defines VAWG as 'acts of violence or abuse that we know disproportionately affect women and girls' including, but not limited to the following crimes and behaviour 'rape and other sexual offences, domestic abuse, stalking, 'honour'-based abuse (including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and 'honour' killings)', as well as offences committed online.

2.2 According to the most recent statistics ¹ cited in the Government strategy: nationally, 1 in 5 women are victims of sexual assault (or attempted assault) in their lifetime (5% of victims are men); over 27% of women have experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16 (14% of men); and 20% of women aged 16-74 have experienced stalking since the age of 16 (10% of men).

¹ [Tackling violence against women and girls \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

2.3 Local Data for the period 2021/2022 tells us that:

- 12,797 crimes recorded by Gloucestershire police were tagged as VAWG (a 44% increase from 20/21)
- Domestic Abuse accounts for 44% of all VAWG crimes recorded by Gloucestershire police. There were 7670 domestic abuse crimes recorded by Gloucestershire Police in 21/22 (a 42% increase from 20/21: reflecting a continued upward trend).
- 1516 stalking crimes were recorded in 21/22 (compared with 591 recorded in 20/21). While the vast majority of stalking crimes are linked to domestic abuse; 2% of recorded stalking crimes that are classified as VAWG relate to non-Domestic Abuse stalking.
- 1912 sexual offences were recorded in 21/22 (a 39% increase from 20/21)

2.4. It should be noted that while increases in crime may reflect a higher incidence, it may also be the result of improved recording measures, increased awareness, and an increase in victims' willingness to report what's happened to the police. Increases in reported crime can be viewed positively as we know that these types of crimes against women and girls often go unreported.

3. The current local response to VAWG

3.1. The Scrutiny Committee requested an update on how the local response to VAWG is currently co-ordinated in the county and details of the actions being taken to address the issue. Full details are available in the [paper submitted to the March meeting of the committee](#); and a summary is presented here.

3.2. Locally, the response to VAWG is shared between several lead organisations, including, but not limited to the County Council, Gloucestershire Constabulary and the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC). There are also a number of multi-agency partnership groups who provide strategic oversight and co-ordination:

- The Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board (chaired by the Director of Public Health)
- The Sexual Violence Partnership Board (chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive, Office of Police and Crime Commissioner); and
- Safer Gloucestershire (chaired by the Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner) (which works with the district led Community Safety Partnerships).

3.3. The strength of partnership working in this area is reflected in the successful development of multi-agency countywide strategies to address domestic abuse (DA) and sexual violence (SV). While people of all genders can be victims of violence,

evidence shows that DA and SV disproportionately affect women. Several jointly funded posts have also been agreed locally to support the co-ordination of this work, including the County Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (DASV) Strategic Coordinator and the DASV Consultation Officer who helps ensure the voices of victims are heard in decision making.

3.4. The Committee received assurance on the County Council's lead role in co-ordinating the delivery of the countywide strategy for the prevention of domestic abuse in line with its new statutory duties; and the prioritisation of work to tackle VAWG both within the county's Police and Crime Prevention Plan overseen by the OPCC and the work of Gloucestershire police.

3.5. The local response to address VAWG can be grouped around several cross-cutting objectives:

- providing high quality support for victims and survivors
- enabling the creation of safe public and online spaces for women
- addressing and pursuing the perpetrators of violence; and
- prioritising prevention, early intervention, and education across the life course, with a particular focus on young people.

3.6. There are a range of commissioned services and interventions already in place to support delivery against these objectives, as well as new investment secured by the OPCC under the Government's Safer Streets Fund.

Examples include: -

- *The Gloucestershire Domestic Abuse Support Service (GDASS)* which provides a comprehensive range of support to victims, including a helpdesk, group support, and 1:1 support from specialist Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs)
- *The STREET service* (Safe Teenage Relationships Education and Empowerment Team) who provided support to young people aged 13-19 years affected by DA;
- *Positive Relationships Gloucestershire (PRG)* a countywide service aimed at addressing the behaviours of perpetrators of domestic abuse through structured support programmes.
- *The Independent Sexual Violence Advisors* service provided by Gloucestershire Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre which provides free and confidential support and advice to anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted at any time in their lives.

- The constabulary led *Stalking Clinic* which coordinate the response to high-risk stalking reported to the police.
- The constabulary's participation in *Operation Soteria Bluestone* which aims to improve the criminal justice process for rape to better support victims and focus on tackling perpetrators and repeat offenders.
- The *FLARE app* developed by Safer Gloucestershire which enables women and girls to anonymously share their experiences of where and when they've felt unsafe in the county to inform our local intelligence.
- Investment in the Nelson Trust's work to support vulnerable women.
- Investment in mobile CCTV, street lighting and drug testing machines for the night-time economy to tackle spiking.

3.7. There is also an ongoing focus on training and workforce development, including investment in bystander training, training for front line professionals on spotting the signs of DA and assessing risk; and a specialised learning and development programme for police officers as part of work to improve support for rape victims.

4. White Ribbon accreditation

4.1. At the council meeting on 9 November 2022, Council Motion 908 committed the council to seeking White Ribbon accreditation; a nationally recognised accreditation demonstrating an organisation's commitment to ending male violence against women.

4.2. Rob Ayliffe agreed to act as the Council's Senior Ambassador for the programme and a steering group was established with representation from across the Council to oversee the development and delivery of a three-year White Ribbon Action Plan.

4.3. Work is being taken forward to establish a network of White Ribbon Ambassadors and Champions throughout Gloucestershire County Council.

4.4. In line with the White Ribbon accreditation, the action plan will be focused on four key work-areas: (a) strategic leadership; (b) engaging men and boys; (c) changing culture; and (d) raising awareness. The ASCC scrutiny committee has requested regular updates on progress.

5. The new Serious Violence Duty

5.1. The Home Office has introduced a new Serious Violence Duty which came into effect at the end of January 2023. Under the duty, specified authorities in a local area, including local authorities, fire and rescue services, health, the police, and the justice system must co-operate on the development and delivery of a strategy to reduce serious violence in their area.

5.2. The Committee welcomes the introduction of the duty and the opportunity for system partners involved in its delivery to consider the prevention of violence against women and girls within its remit.

6. Building trust and confidence in the police: addressing sexism and misogyny in the force

6.1. The Police and Crime Panel received a report at its July meeting from Gloucestershire Constabulary regarding progress under its programme of work to address violence and intimidation against women and girls. The report and discussion focused specifically on steps being taken to address *internal* sexism and misogyny within the force. These include, but are not limited to:

- reviewing all current allegations of sexual misconduct, domestic abuse and other VAWG - related offences against officers and staff, and ensuring that they are being investigated fully and quickly.
- clear and frequent communications that misogynistic, sexist, and sexualised behaviour will not be tolerated by anyone in policing.
- establishing a strong 'call it out' culture; supported by safe processes for reporting inappropriate behaviours.
- establishing regular independent scrutiny of force performance in responding to VAWG, aligned to internal audit activity.

Further information is available in the [full report](#).

6.2. The panel were informed that a successful conference had been held in May focused on the Constabulary's internal VAWG culture and focus groups were taking place to review and report on progress. The panel acknowledged that improving internal culture will also impact on overall trust and confidence in the police and their response to VAWG in wider society.

7. Points of assurance and recommendations

7.1. Having considered evidence of work underway in the county, the Committee sought assurance on the following areas. These have given rise to recommendations (set out below) both for the Committee and for Cabinet:

7.2. **Outcome data:** While it is important that we have data on the crimes against women and girls which have been reported, the Committee also want to understand how the police responded to these reports and the proportion of successful prosecutions. This is important in generating trust in the police and confidence that crimes will be taken seriously.

Recommendation: that the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee request the Police and Crime panel to explore and report on this issue.

7.3. Safe accommodation for victims: The Committee is concerned that the provision of safe accommodation (including refuge) for victims of domestic abuse in the county is sufficient to meet demand.

The Committee understands that increasing the amount and range of safe accommodation is a key objective in the Gloucestershire domestic abuse strategy. Feedback from victims indicates that the majority prefer to be supported to remain safely in their own home, and the county's sanctuary and targeting hardening schemes are designed to enable this. While refuge is an important option for some victims, it will not be suitable for everyone; and the district councils are working to increase the provision of safe accommodation in Places of Safety. However, the Committee understands that there are challenges in sourcing appropriate accommodation due both to a shortage of social housing and high demand from a range of sources.

Recommendation: The Committee asks Cabinet to note the shortages of suitable accommodation and work with the districts and ask that the District Councils, as local housing authorities, look at options to address this issue.

7.4. The importance of how we communicate on the topic of VAWG: Committee members wish to highlight the need for sensitivity in the language and images used in any awareness raising on VAWG to avoid conveying any unintended messages.

Recommendation: The Committee believe it is incumbent on all the Council (officers and elected members) to show an awareness of language and would ask that this is considered by the White Ribbon steering group and the Communication directorate.

7.5. Putting prevention at the core of all we do: while the Committee welcome initiatives such as CCTV and street lighting to create safer spaces for women and girls; the committee is clear that prevention and behaviour change must be central to any long term, sustainable strategy to prevent VAWG, with a particular focus on young people.

Recommendation: The Committee ask that Cabinet support the promotion of healthy relationships education for young people and work to address misogynistic attitudes and behaviours in young boys and men with a focus on schools and educational establishments.

7.6. The importance of listening to those with lived experience: The Committee believes it is vitally important that we hear from people with lived experience of

domestic abuse and ensure the voice of victims informs the work of local agencies and service providers.

The Committee welcome the appointment of a Consultation Officer based at the OPCC who is leading on engaging with those with lived experience of DA and sexual violence and feeding the learning back into service and policy development.

Recommendation: The Committee would ask that the Council and its partners commit to continuing to engage with and listen to women who have been victims of violence and intimidation and respecting and learning from their lived experience.

7.7. Delivery of the White Ribbon accreditation: While the Committee fully welcomed the Council's commitment to achieving White Ribbon accreditation, members have requested clarification around the respective roles of men and women in delivering the programme.

White Ribbon is based on encouraging men (and people who identify as male) to become allies in preventing men's violence against women and acting as 'White Ribbon Ambassadors'. Women (who do not identify as male) can enlist as White Ribbon Champions who hold men to account and ensure that women's voices are heard. The Committee is concerned that the terminology might imply that men, in their capacity as 'ambassadors', carry more authority and importance in the programme than their female counterparts. The Committee would rather see shared terms which reflect the equal contribution that men and women can make to the programme.

Recommendation: The committee has written to the White Ribbon programme to flag their concerns; but also ask that the Council recognises the joint roles of men and women in the programme and ensure that the female perspective is acknowledged, while also acknowledging the importance of men as agents of change.

7.8. Awareness and accessibility of support: The Committee welcome the range of services available to support victims of violence in the county but would highlight the need to continue to raise awareness of the support available and ensure that victims feel confident in coming forward.

Data included in the Government's national strategy on the prevention of VAWG, indicates that a third of victims and survivors felt that their identity or personal characteristics acted as a barrier to accessing support or other services. Some of the personal characteristics that they felt acted as a barrier included their sex or gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture or religion, illness or disability, age, socio-economic status, and/or their personal history.

Recommendation: The Committee recognises the importance of tailoring support to individuals and would ask that commissioners and service providers take steps to ensure services are accessible to all, including those from protected characteristic groups, and have a cultural understanding of victim's experiences.

7.9. Building trust and confidence in the police: a national victim and survivor survey suggests that many victims do not report incidents to the police because they think nothing will be done, they feel embarrassed or fear that they will not be believed.

The Committee welcome the work by Gloucestershire police and the OPCC to address VAWG and the recognition in the police's VAWG strategy of the need to build trust and confidence in the service.

8. Conclusions of the Committee's investigation and recommendations

8.1. The Committee acknowledges the strength of the existing partnerships in the county which contribute to the VAWG agenda; and the range of services in place to support victims. The Committee also welcomes the clear commitment to address VAWG made by Gloucestershire police and the OPCC, and the work which is being progressed.

8.2. Scrutiny members also recognise the central role which the Council plays in working with its partners to lead delivery of the countywide domestic abuse strategy.

8.3. The Committee is assured by the Council's existing engagement with relevant local agencies in relation to support for victims and survivors of violence and abuse. This includes the Council's involvement in the Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board and commissioning of a range of support services and co-funded roles within the police and the OPCC.

8.4. With respect to training, the Committee acknowledges GCC's new investment in a funded training programme for front line staff on domestic abuse (using DLUHC grant funding), and the OPCC's investment in Bystander training. The Committee would ask that all elected members take the opportunity to watch back the bespoke training and awareness session provided to Councillors on VAWG earlier this year.

8.5. The Council's commitment to achieving White Ribbon accreditation is positive and the Committee would ask that the Cabinet fully endorse work to progress the delivery plan and actions being taken forward around the four work-streams of: 'strategic leadership', 'raising awareness', 'changing culture' and 'engaging men and boys'. White Ribbon will be a success if we can demonstrate positive change in our culture and behaviours both internally and in the Council's work as an 'anchor institution' in the local community.

The Committee would ask that all Cabinet members consider signing up to become White Ribbon Ambassadors or Champions to demonstrate their personal commitment to ending VAWG.

8.6. While the Committee is content with the progress to date in the county to address VAWG and the clear focus on the issue, it acknowledges that there will always be room to do more, and that this is a long-term process. Lasting change requires a concerted effort from all partners underpinned by a focus on prevention and behaviour change to ensure all women and girls feel safe and secure in their everyday lives.

8.7. In conclusion, the Committee would ask that Cabinet consider how we can continue to use the Council's influence at the system and community level to drive forward change; and that all Councillors to take an active role in supporting local work to end violence against women and girls through advocacy and allyship.

Annex A: Summary of Recommendations/Proposals

1. Recommendation relating to 7.2 Outcome Data. It is important that we understand the outcomes with respect to the police response to reports of VAWG. The Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee propose making a request to the Gloucestershire Police and Crime Panel to explore and report on this issue.

2. Recommendation relating to 7.3 Safe accommodation for victims: The Committee asks Cabinet to note the shortages of suitable accommodation and work with the districts and ask that the district councils, as local housing authorities, look at options to address this issue.

3. Recommendation relating to 7.4 Sensitivity in the language and images used in to raise awareness on VAWG. The Committee believe it is incumbent on all the Council (officers and elected members) to show an awareness of language and would ask that this is considered by the White Ribbon steering group and the Communication directorate.

4. Recommendation relating to 7.5 Prevention: The Committee ask that Cabinet support the promotion of healthy relationships education for young people and work to address misogynistic attitudes and behaviours in young boys and men with a focus on schools and educational establishments.

5. Recommendation relating to 7.6 Lived experience: The Committee ask that the Council and its partners commit to continuing to engage with and listen to women who have been victims of violence and intimidation and respecting and learning from their lived experience.

6. Recommendation relating to delivery of White Ribbon Accreditation Status
The committee has written to the White Ribbon programme to flag their concerns; but would also ask that the Council recognises the joint roles of men and women in the programme and ensure that the female perspective is acknowledged, while also acknowledging the importance of men as agents of change. The Committee also ask that all Cabinet members consider signing up to become White Ribbon Ambassadors or Champions to demonstrate their personal commitment to ending VAWG.

7. Recommendation relating to 7.8. Awareness and accessibility of support for victims: The Committee recognises the importance of tailoring support to individuals and ask that commissioners and service providers take steps to ensure services are accessible to all, including those from protected characteristic groups, and have a cultural understanding of victim's experiences.

8. Recommendation relating to 8.7. In conclusion, the Committee ask that Cabinet consider how we can continue to use the Council's influence at the system and community level to drive forward change; and that all Councillors to take an active role in supporting local work to end violence against women and girls through advocacy and ally ship.